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FM AMEMBASSY RANGOON

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 7042

INFO RUCNASE/ASEAN MEMBER COLLECTIVE

RUEHGG/UN SECURITY COUNCIL COLLECTIVE

RUEHBY/AMEMBASSY CANBERRA 0840

RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI 4386

RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL 7931

RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO 5492

RHHMUNA/CDR USPACOM HONOLULU HI

RUEHGV/USMISSION GENEVA 3468

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 1280

RUEKJCS/SECDEF WASHDC

RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS

RUEKJCS/Joint STAFF WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 RANGOON 000041

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STATE FOR EAP AND IO; PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/20/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL PHUM BM

SUBJECT: BURMA: AUTHORITIES THWART PLANNED PROTEST

REF: RANGOON 27

Classified By: Pol Officer Sean O'Neill for Reasons 1.4 (b) & (d)

¶1. (C) Summary. Police in Taunggok, Rakhine State disrupted a scheduled protest yesterday morning. No violence or arrests were reported and local residents said the situation in town was calm. We have seen nothing to confirm UK Ambassador Mark Canning's account of a 40-person protest in downtown Rangoon this week. The Myanmar Times' News Chief of Staff has resigned following his demotion for having published a story about new satellite TV fees. It is not known whether he resigned in protest or was forced out. The regime's Press Scrutiny Board has advised two local newspapers to alter the content of their stories. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Rakhine State NLD member Ni Ni May Myint told us authorities preempted a scheduled protest in Taunggok the morning of September 17. At least 70 people, including approximately 10 monks, had planned to stage a demonstration at the town market to protest the government's purchase of rice at artificially low prices and to demand the release of political prisoners. However, police got word of the plan ahead of time and were on the scene at 7:00 a.m. to disperse protestors, according to local NLD officials. Authorities also closed the town's market, schools, roads, and water travel routes yesterday to prevent any further gatherings. All were reopened today. Ni Ni May Myint said there were no arrests or violence and reported that business in town had returned to normal. However, local residents continued to see small groups of police, USDA, and Swan Arr Shin around town, and speculated their presence was meant to discourage any additional protests.

¶3. (C) In a January 17 interview, UK Ambassador Mark Canning told the Guardian newspaper that approximately 40 persons staged a protest in downtown Rangoon this week. The UK's political officer told us two of their contacts reported the protests took place in front of the normally-bustling Sule Pagoda on Tuesday or Wednesday. She went on to note, however, that the absence of any exile news coverage called these reports into question. Similarly, none of our diplomatic or local contacts witnessed or reported any demonstrations in Rangoon and everyone we spoke with doubted that any took place.

¶4. (C) A reporter at the Myanmar Times confirmed press reports that Win Kyaw Oo had resigned his position as the paper's News Chief of Staff. Win Kyaw Oo was one of four editors demoted to administrative jobs after the regime criticized their decision to report the recent increase in satellite TV fees (reftel). Our source did not know whether Win Kyaw Oo had been forced out or resigned in protest following his demotion. In an interview with the BBC, Australian Editor-in-Chief Ross Dunkley denied that authorities forced him to demote the four editors. He went on to add, however, that he wanted to reform his newsroom anyway and said the regime's criticism just prompted him to do so sooner. Our media contacts regarded Win Kyaw Oo as a strong advocate for a free press and noted that he had frequently written articles the regime subsequently censored.

¶5. (C) The senior editor of the Myanmar Tribune, Min Naing Soe, told our PD assistant that on January 10, the Press Scrutiny Board summoned him and the senior editor from the Action Times to discuss the content of their newspapers. According to Min Naing Soe, the director of the board criticized them for carrying too many hard news stories and advised them instead to include more coverage of celebrities and pop culture.

¶6. (C) Comment. The lengths to which local authorities went to preempt the planned protest in Taunggok demonstrates how seriously the Than Shwe regime takes the threat of further demonstrations, and how determined they are to prevent them. Their paranoia extends to the press, resulting in the intimidation of journalists and reporters who have not

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criticized the regime. While the Myanmar Times likes to call itself an independent newspaper, the Editor-in-Chief has repeatedly shown his craveness when questioned by the regime. The heavy-handed tactics by the regime to prevent dissent do nothing to address the underlying grievances of the people. These tactics only increase the likelihood of another eruption of popular anger against the regime. End Comment.

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